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INTELLIGENCE WARNING OF THE TET OFFENSIVE IN SOUTH VIETNAM

(Interim Report)

A. Procedures

1. A working group has been formed under the chairmanship of R. J. Smith, on which CIA, DIA, INR, NSA, and the Joint Staff are represented. This group has compiled dossiers on the raw intelligence informa- and intelligence summaries and judgments received in various US headquarters before Tet, with emphasis on the period 15-30 January 1968, and on the finished intelligence disseminated to senior officers of the government as a result.

2. Representatives of the group from CIA, DIA, and the Joint Staff visited Vietnam from 16 to 23 March. They were joined there by observers from CINCPAC, MACV, and the CIA station in Saigon. In addition to collecting a large quantity of pertinent documents, the delegation received briefings and conducted interviews, both in Saigon and the field, with many senior officials, US and Vietnamese. On the US side, members of the delegation talked to Ambassador Bunker, General Westmoreland, General Abrams, Ambassador Komer, Lt. General Cushman, Lt. General Rosson, Maj. General Peers, Maj. General Eckhardt, and the commanding generals of 1st Marine Division and 4th Infantry Division. They also interviewed the G-2s of I and II Field Forces and the G-2 of III Marine Amphibious Force, and the G-2 advisers and the CIA Regional officers in all four Corps Tactical Zones (CTZs). They were briefed extensively by MACV J-2 and by the CIA station in Saigon, and contacted the Director of Intelligence, Seventh Air Force, NSA Representative Vietnam, and the Army Headquarters Area Command in Saigon. On the Vietnamese side, they interviewed the commanding generals of I and II Corps, J-2 of the Joint General Staff and his deputy, and the deputy director of National Police. In the course of these discussions members of the group visited Phu Bai, Da Nang, Pleiku, Camp Enari, Nha Trang, Bien Hoa, Long Binh, and Can Tho.

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[redacted]

B. General Findings

3. As the DCI informed the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in February, there was evidence, both in Saigon and in Washington, that the enemy was engaging in his much-advertised "winter-spring campaign" and was preparing for a series of coordinated attacks, probably on a larger scale than ever before. There was evidence in January that some attacks in the highlands might be conducted during the Tet holiday. In the latter part of the month it was evident that other attacks were imminent, and some of the targets had been identified. Both in Saigon and in Washington this intelligence was communicated to senior military and political officers. As a result, a series of actions were taken in Vietnam which reduced the impact of the enemy offensive.

4. The warning thus provided represents no small achievement for the US intelligence apparatus in Vietnam. It has no high-level clandestine penetrations of the Communist hierarchy [redacted]. This is difficult under any circumstances. The intelligence organization itself, military and civil, US and Vietnamese, is complex and the volume of material it handles is large. Thus, the recognition of significant reports from human sources through the blare of background noise presents a major problem. Moreover, the very nature of the war leads to the "crying wolf" syndrome. We have little doubt that at some level of the intelligence apparatus low-level reports could be found forecasting many of the attacks made at Tet; we have equally little doubt that similar reports could be found alluding to attacks on many other cities and on many other dates.

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[redacted]

C. Impact

7. the intensity, coordination, and timing of the enemy attack were not fully anticipated. Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland attest to this. The most important factor was timing. Few US or GVN officials believed the enemy would attack during Tet, nor did the Vietnamese public. There was good reason for this: Tet symbolizes the solidarity of the Vietnamese people. It is the most important holiday in Vietnam, an occasion observed by all members of every family whether they are Buddhist, Christian, or Communist. The Communists evidently believed they could exploit this solidarity to produce an antigovernment, antiforeign, antiwar uprising. This did not take place. The enemy therefore paid a price in the antagonisms he generated among the urban population,

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but he gained enormously in two ways: The GVN's army and police were generally far below their usual state of readiness, and the precedent of Tet made it possible for large numbers of VC to enter the cities without causing alarm. General Westmoreland expected heavy attacks either just before or just after Tet, and as Tet approached and major attacks had not materialized, the Vietnamese Joint General Staff had authorized 50 percent leaves. Evidence to upset this general belief did not come to hand until 24 hours or so before the attacks were launched, the most important being the premature initiatives in MR-5. The latter brought the intelligence already available into sharp focus and provided the missing element of timing. In the short time available, US and ARVN units could be alerted and were, but ARVN performance was reduced in many areas by Tet leaves.

8. A second major unexpected element was the number of simultaneous attacks mounted. US intelligence had given the enemy a capability of attacking virtually all of the points which he did in fact attack and of mounting coordinated attacks in a number of areas. He was not, however, granted a specific capability for coordinated attacks in all areas at once. More important, the nature of the targets was not anticipated. Washington and Saigon expected attacks on some cities, but they did not expect the offensive to have the cities, the civilian command and control centers, radio stations and police headquarters as primary objectives. Finally, the quantity of new, modern weapons in the hands of Main and Local Force Viet Cong who engaged in the attacks was higher than expected. The AK-47 rifle and RPG-7 antitank grenade were particularly effective against ARVN units and the Regional and Popular Forces.

9. Underlying these specific problems was a more basic one: most commanders and intelligence officers, at all levels, did not visualize the enemy as capable of accomplishing his stated goals as they appeared in propaganda and in captured documents. Prevailing estimates of attrition, infiltration, and local recruitment, reports of low morale,

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and a long series of defeats had degraded our image of the enemy. The general picture presented was an enemy unable to conduct an offensive of such scope and intensity. Commanders and intelligence officers saw his generalized calls for a "general uprising" as merely exhortatory, and not as a blueprint for what was to follow. Moreover, in the past many "great offensives" had blossomed in Communist propaganda but had not materialized on the ground.

D. Response to Warnings

10. Nevertheless, Washington and Saigon were, [redacted] aware that the enemy planned a major offensive, probably coordinated attacks in northern I CTZ, at Dak To in the highlands of II CTZ, and toward Saigon from virtually all sides in III CTZ. As early as 10 January, General Westmoreland had canceled certain planned operations in northern III CTZ in order to reposition US forces nearer to Saigon. In subsequent days he issued a series of warnings to his commanders, and to the US Mission, that the enemy was preparing to attack. Although he had not originally expected attacks during Tet, he recognized the significance of the premature attacks in MR 5 and on 30 January notified all his commanders to expect attacks that night. As a result all US units were fully alerted, although in most cases they did not have time or information to take offensive measures against the enemy prior to the actual attack. All Seventh Air Force bases were put on a maximum state of alert, and the 7th AF Director of Intelligence testifies that this step "saved Tan Son Nhut." Perhaps the best evidence that COMUSMACV's measures were effective and that the enemy's strategic intelligence was faulty is that, with the exception of Hue, the enemy failed to hold any of his major military objectives for a significant period of time.

11. The urgency felt in Saigon was not, however, fully felt in Washington in the immediate pre-attack period. As a result, finished intelligence disseminated in Washington did not contain the atmosphere of crisis present in Saigon. We do not believe this represents a failure on anyone's part. The information available

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[redacted]

was transmitted and duly analyzed, but atmosphere is not readily passed over a teletype circuit. Although senior officials in Washington received warnings in the period 25-30 January, they did not receive the full sense of immediacy and intensity which was present in Saigon. On the other hand, with Saigon alerted, virtually nothing further could be done in Washington that late in the game which could affect the outcome.

12. Within this general picture, there were significant differences among the four corps areas. III MAF expected assaults on Khe Sanh and Quang Tri. It had received from a local CIA operation the enemy attack plan for Da Nang, but not the date. General Cushman stated that he expected to be attacked during Tet, and enemy activities in northern I CTZ had prompted higher authority to cancel the Tet truce in I CTZ. As a result both US and Vietnamese forces were better prepared here than elsewhere. Most Vietnamese units were at nearly full strength. The extent and coordination of the enemy's attacks, considerably exceeded expectations, as did his tenaciously held lodgement in Hue. In general, however, his assaults were easily thrown back.

13. In II CTZ, allied forces in the coastal lowlands were for the most part attacked on the night of 29-30 January by MR 5 units. They did not have the advantage of forewarning which these attacks provided units farther south, nor were they in the "alert" posture of Allied forces in I Corps. The Allied forces were on a higher than normal state of alert, which was, however, directed against the inevitable cease-fire violations rather than attacks on the cities. In the highlands, singularly unlike any other area, intelligence was [redacted] prisoners, and documents reflecting specific plans for attacks during Tet. For instance, Communist plans for attacking Dak To, Pleiku, and Kontum were known well in advance, and the US 4th Division was able to correlate them with enemy deployments. This provided one of the few opportunities for US forces to take active measures against the enemy; Pleiku was the most successful US operation of the offensive. Elsewhere in the highlands intelligence was not as good, but there was enough information to lead two of the three ARVN division commanders in II CTZ to cancel all leaves on their

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own initiative. We do not believe, however, that these orders were totally effective in recovering personnel who had already departed.

14. It has been noted above that US redeployments in III Corps began before mid-January. These movements were triggered by the concentration of three enemy divisions along the Cambodian border north and northwest of Saigon and by indications that these units were beginning to deploy southward toward the city.

III Corps and II Field Force were put on a general alert on 30 January (General Westmoreland's actions resulting from the attacks in MR 5 the previous night), and during the course of the day began to receive more specific information that Saigon was to be attacked that night. In most ARVN units in III Corps the troops appear to have been in their normal Tet condition.

15. In IV CTZ, the nature and extent of the enemy's attacks were almost totally unexpected. Allied forces were aware that Viet Cong capabilities had improved.

The supply of modern weapons had increased and the VC had shown an ability to conduct a series of coordinated attacks throughout the Delta. To some degree however, this could be interpreted as reactions to a more aggressive allied posture in the area. In the Delta cities the presence of the VC during Tet was so traditional as to be accepted as routine. General Eckhardt, Senior Adviser, stated that the only warning he received was General Westmoreland's alerting message of 30 January. General Eckhardt was able to alert the US support and logistic units in the Delta, but was unable in the time available to restore the readiness of ARVN units. The ARVN Corps commander and his three division commanders were present at their headquarters when the offensive struck, but their units were far below strength.

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E. Responses to Specific Questions

16. The preceding paragraphs have been responsive to General Taylor's questions a, b, f, and g. Our preliminary findings on questions c, d, and e are as follows:

c. (Provision of information by civilians

Prior to the offensive there were very few cases of civilians volunteering information on the impending attacks. This is not necessarily, however, a measure of the degree of civilian cooperation with the regime. The enemy's security measures, his rapid deployments through territory much of which was under his control, and the basic difficulty of rapid communication from countryside to city would have prevented friendly villages from passing warnings in many cases. As noted above the presence of infiltrators in the cities was unremarkable during Tet. During the Tet fighting, and since, there has been a marked increase in information volunteered from the populace.

d. (Exchange of information)

Given the size and complexity of the US and Vietnamese intelligence systems, we found cooperation and exchange in this case to be remarkably good. No case was reported to us of the deliberate withholding of significant warning information by one agency from another. With the mass of intelligence information acquired in Vietnam every day, there was inevitably some human error. Not all low-level reports got to everyone they should have. There is no evidence, however, that these minor shortcomings affected the general intelligence picture.

e. (Identification of units)

Most of the units engaged in the offensive have been identified. In general, there was a close correlation between US order-of-battle holdings in a given area prior to the attacks and the units identified in the attacks, although not all units deployed in any given area were actually committed in most cases, and some new provisional units were identified in the attacks. As noted above, the enemy's facade of

a "general uprising" required him to attack with his Viet Cong units wherever possible. Especially in III and IV CTZs he held back many Main Force and most NVN units for follow-up. Because of the failure of the initial attacks, in all but a few instances a follow-up never came.

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B. General Findings

3. As the DCI informed the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board in February, there was evidence, both in Saigon and in Washington, that the enemy was engaging in his much-advertised "winter-spring campaign" and was preparing for a series of coordinated attacks, probably on a larger scale than ever before. There was evidence in January that some attacks in the highlands might be conducted during the Tet holiday. In the latter part of the month it was evident that other attacks were imminent, and some of the targets had been identified. Both in Saigon and in Washington this intelligence was communicated to senior military and political officers. As a result, a series of actions were taken in Vietnam which reduced the impact of the enemy offensive.

4. The warning thus provided represents no small achievement for the US intelligence apparatus in Vietnam. [redacted] It must therefore rely on classic indications techniques. [redacted] The intelligence organization itself, military and civil, US and Vietnamese, is complex and the volume of material it handles is large. Thus, the recognition of significant reports from human sources through the blare of background noise presents a major problem. Moreover, the very nature of the war leads to the "crying wolf" syndrome. We have little doubt that at some level of the intelligence apparatus low-level reports could be found forecasting many of the attacks made at Tet; we have equally little doubt that similar reports could be found alluding to attacks on many other cities and on many other dates.

5. The enemy took great pains to conceal his intentions. Knowledge of his plans was fully compartmented and the actual attack order was disseminated to attacking units only in the final 24 to 72 hours. Although US and Vietnamese authorities received some reports of individual attack plans, probably no Communist officer below the

level of COSVN, front, or military region was aware of the full scope of the offensive. General Westmoreland believes the Communists sacrificed coordination for security, and this is evident in the premature attacks by units of Military Region 5 (MR 5) on the night of 29-30 January, attacks which served to alert the US command to the much more extensive attacks on the following night.

6. [redacted] communications intelligence was able to provide clear warning that attacks, probably on a larger scale than ever before, were in the offing. [redacted] These messages appeared in many areas of South Vietnam. They included references to impending attacks, more widespread and numerous than seen before. Moreover, they indicated a sense of urgency, along with an emphasis on thorough planning and secrecy not previously seen in such communications. These messages, taken with such contextual indicators as increased message volumes and radio direction finding, served both to validate information from other sources in the hands of local authorities and to provide warning to senior officials. The indicators, however, were not sufficient to predict the exact timing of the attack.

C. Impact of the Enemy Offensive

7. Although warning had thus been provided, the intensity, coordination, and timing of the enemy attack were not fully anticipated. Ambassador Bunker and General Westmoreland attest to this. The most important factor was timing. Few US or GVN officials believed the enemy would attack during Tet, nor did the Vietnamese public. There was good reason for this: Tet symbolizes the solidarity of the Vietnamese people. It is the most important holiday in Vietnam, an occasion observed by all members of every family whether they are Buddhist, Christian, or Communist. The Communists evidently believed they could exploit this solidarity to produce an antigovernment, antiforeign, antiwar uprising. This did not take place. The enemy therefore paid a price in the antagonisms he generated among the urban population,

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14. It has been noted above that US redeployments in III Corps began before mid-January. These movements were triggered by the concentration of three enemy divisions along the Cambodian border north and northwest of Saigon and by indications that these units were beginning to deploy southward toward the city. In addition, US and ARVN intelligence officers had earlier deduced from a reorganization of the enemy command structure in MR 4, which surrounds the Saigon area, that its purpose was to improve command and control for the coordination of an attack on that city. III Corps and II Field Force were put on a general alert on 30 January (General Westmoreland's actions resulting from the attacks in MR 5 the previous night), and during the course of the day began to receive more specific information that Saigon was to be attacked that night. In most ARVN units in III Corps the troops appear to have been in their normal Tet condition.

15. In IV CTZ, the nature and extent of the enemy's attacks were almost totally unexpected. Allied forces were aware that Viet Cong capabilities had improved. An NSA report of 25 January, which warned of the possibility of impending attacks in other areas, noted that units in the "Nam Bo area," which includes the Delta, might also be involved. The supply of modern weapons had increased and the VC had shown an ability to conduct a series of coordinated attacks throughout the Delta. To some degree however, this could be interpreted as reactions to a more aggressive allied posture in the area. In the Delta cities the presence of the VC during Tet was so traditional as to be accepted as routine. General Eckhardt, Senior Adviser, stated that the only warning he received was General Westmoreland's alerting message of 30 January. General Eckhardt was able to alert the US support and logistic units in the Delta, but was unable in the time available to restore the readiness of ARVN units. The ARVN Corps commander and his three division commanders were present at their headquarters when the offensive struck, but their units were far below strength.

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